97-84054-20

U.S. Public Health Service

An open forum on the "open house"

[Washington]

1921

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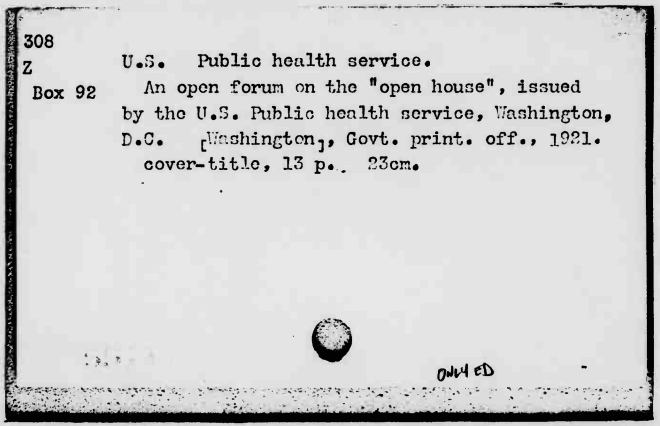
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Box 92
U.S. Public health service.
An open forum on the "open house", issued
by the U.S. Public health service, Washington,
D.C. [Washington], Govt. print. off., 1931.
cover-title, 13 p., 23cm.

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TECHNICAL MICROFORM DATA

FILM SIZE: 35 mm REDUCTION RATIO: 10:1 IMAGE PLACEMENT: IA (IIA) IB IIB

DATE FILMED: 3-26-97 INITIALS: PB

TRACKING # : 22855

FILMED BY PRESERVATION RESOURCES, BETHLEHEM, PA.

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AN OPEN FORUM ON THE "OPEN HOUSE"

JAN 26 1922

Issued by

THE U. S. PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE

WASHINGTON, D. C.

GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE : 1921

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AN OPEN FORUM ON THE "OPEN HOUSE"

The United States Public Health Service, with the cooperation of various State boards of health and the American Federation of Labor, recently sent out a questionnaire on the subject of prostitution and the treatment of prostitutes. Copies were sent to mayors of large cities and to central labor union secretaries. The mayors were asked to distribute those which they received to chambers of commerce, bank presidents, women's organizations, chiefs of police, and representative citizens of their own selection. The secretaries of central labor unions were requested to distribute those which they received to members of different labor unions represented in the central body.

The letter which accompanied these questionnaires not only invited a frank expression of opinion, but also offered, as an additional inducement to frankness, the opportunity to omit the name if the individual so desired.

A total of 1,707 questionnaires were returned from 572 cities. The classification of these replies, according to occupation, follows:

Representatives of amusement trades	27
Bankers	89
Representatives of building trades	356
Representatives of chambers of commerce	84
Chiefs of police	127
Representatives of clerical trades	15
Representatives of culinary and provision trades	58
Federal, State, and municipal employees	74
Representatives of metal trades	169
Representatives of mining trades	47
Representatives of needle and textile trades	15
Representatives of printing trades	76
Representatives of transportation trades	164
Representatives of women's organizations	84
Miscellaneous	283
Occupation not given	39
Total	1,707

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I.

The first question asked was as follows:

The Public Health Service and the State boards of health believe that open houses of prostitution are a menace to public health and should be abolished in every community. Do you agree with this point of view? (Yes or no.) Why?

The replies to this question were:

Yes	1,172
No	494
No answer	41

It is significant to note that among the 1,172 who voted "Yes," 104 representatives of the transportation trades voted "Yes" to 54 who voted "No." One hundred and eight chiefs of police voted "Yes," and only 15 chiefs of police did not subscribe to the public health point of view. Metal trades voted 90 "Yes" to 72 "No." Carpenters voted 103 "Yes" to 44 "No," while representatives of the combined building trades gave a total of 215 "Yes" to 131 "No." Printing trades voted 42 "Yes" to 33 "No;" mining trades 32 "Yes" to 15 "No."

One Illinois miner answered that he agreed with the Public Health Service, "because the life of a prostitute is short and her place must be filled when she dies, and being the father of two girls I would not want mine to fill a vacancy, and I think all parents think the same." A Colorado carpenter answered, "Yes; because there is no justification for it and it can not be defended. The woman engaged in such business may not be my wife, mother, sister, or daughter, but she is somebody's wife, mother, sister, or daughter. It is a violation of all law."

One chief of police answered that he agreed, "because open houses of prostitution breed disease, crime, increase the number of prostitutes, corrupt the morals of the community, and are a menace to the youth of the country." Another, "The only reason I have ever heard advanced in favor of houses of prostitution is that they protect innocent girls. I am opposed to sacrificing any woman to benefit others." Another, "Yes. The prostitute is one of the greatest menaces to any community, and why leave an avenue open for young men and women to ruin their lives as well as the lives of children yet unborn."

A printer in Utah wrote, "Yes. The existence of open houses of prostitution, even where visited by comparatively few, contaminates the whole community, degrades the thoughts and conversation of all classes of society. Official toleration of such places gives them a certain standing amounting almost to approval." A molder in

Wisconsin answered, "Yes. Because it lowers the morals of patrons of houses of prostitution, leads to divorces, and breaks up the homes of children—and a hundred other things not fit to mention."

A citizen of California answered, "Yes. Inmates of houses of prostitution can not be successfully examined for venereal diseases; also the open house creates a demand that must be filled by our young girls. Segregation does not segregate." Another, a citizen of Florida, replied, "Yes. Because open houses of prostitution put the State in the position of authorizing and protecting vice, and this should no more be done than to establish a zone in the cities in which murder may be lawfully committed." From an engineer in Nevada came the reply, "Yes. I believe they are disease incubators."

A banker in Minnesota answered, "Yes. Advancing civilization has demonstrated the weakness of the old theory, and there is no valid argument in favor of prostitution."

These replies are typical of the 1,172.

II.

The second question dealt with the alternative point of view:

Or do you believe that there should be open houses of prostitution in your city? (Yes or no.) Why?

The replies to this question were:

No	1,149
Yes	445
No answer	113

Of 151 carpenters replying to this question, only 37 favored open houses of prostitution, as against 107 opposed to such houses. Representatives of transportation trades voted 101 to 49 against open houses. Of 127 chiefs of police replying, only 14 favored open houses, as against 108 opposed to such houses.

The following are a few of the typical replies to this question:

"No. Because they can not be controlled." (*Carpenter, Florida.*)

"Prostitution is not a necessary evil, hence why increase its growth or maintenance?" (*Indiana citizen.*)

"No. Because no way has yet been devised whereby such places can be controlled to prevent the spread of disease." (*Minnesota citizen.*)

"No. Because I do not want a daughter of mine in one." (*Carpenter, Indiana.*)

"No. In order to fight the diseases open houses of prostitution must be abolished. This is where the fight should begin." (*Bookkeeper, Illinois.*)

"No. For the same reason that I do not favor licensing murderers, burglars, thugs, and white-slavers, or any other immoral proposition." (*Cigarmaker, Illinois.*)

"No. I believe in cleanliness in my city. I have a family." (*Barber, Connecticut.*)

"No. Because to admit that there should be, would be to admit that an evil is good, and that is unscientific." (*Wood carver, California.*)

The representative of a women's organization in Indiana replied, "No. Chiefly because I have three girls and two boys. These houses must draw from some mother's children—why not mine? If open houses are tolerated, we countenance them and sanction their place in society."

A postal employee in Alabama struck the same note. "No. If it is to be, then the females must come from some home, and I am not willing for my sister to be one. Are you?"

A sheet-metal worker in Indiana replied, "No. Because venereal diseases and the miserable business of prostitution which spreads them cause disability, wrecked lives, and insanity among men, invalidism and sterility among women, blindness, deformity, and idiocy among children."

III.

The third question was as follows:

Or do you believe that there should be a segregated district in which prostitutes should be allowed to ply their trade? (Yes or no.) Why?

The replies to this question were:

No	944
Yes	707
No answer	56

In considering the answers to this question, it is significant to note that 105 chiefs of police voted "No," as against 16 voting in favor of the segregated district, and the reasons advanced by those opposed to the segregated district lend additional significance to the figures.

Some of the characteristic replies indicative of public opinion on this question are as follows:

"The worst possible policy that could be tolerated in any city with which I am acquainted is segregation." (*City attorney, Indiana.*)

"As reasonably segregate smallpox or diphtheria and allow those who frequent the segregated district to cohabit with the victims and returning, mingle with their intimates without disinfection." (*Pennsylvania banker.*)

"No. A segregated district never segregates. It may segregate some women, but it never segregates the men who carry infection to the innocent." (*Representative women's organization, Georgia.*)

"No. Segregation, it has been proved, is no answer to the question." (*Retail clerk. Illinois.*)

"No. Because they are crime-breeding districts." (*Electrical worker, Indiana.*)

"Absolutely no. I think they should be wiped off the face of the earth." (*Secretary Central Labor Union, Indiana.*)

"No. I believe the general view as to this being a necessary evil to be absolutely a fallacy and that the human being who has not the control of self in this respect should be placed under restraint for the protection of society as a whole." (*Theatrical stage employee, California.*)

"No. There can be no such thing as a real segregated district. Vice spreads through contiguity and there must be districts adjacent to the area segregated. Legalized vice is one of the greatest crimes against humanity, and as such should receive no countenance." (*Miner, Idaho.*)

"No. Segregated districts have been tried and have been found to fail. If given a segregated district, this does not insure them of being free from disease." (*Miner, Illinois.*)

"No. It does not mitigate the evil to segregate it." (*Labor organizer, Illinois.*)

"No. Believe in virtue, not vice." (*Citizen, Massachusetts.*)

"No. The segregated district is a temptation for somebody's boy and a snare for somebody's daughter." (*Citizen, North Dakota.*)

"No. Don't believe in segregated crime." (*Missouri chief of police.*)

"No. They are places for breeding of disease and making of criminals." (*Massachusetts chief of police.*)

"No. Might as well segregate murder." (*Pennsylvania chief of police.*)

"No. Moral leprosy should be eliminated, not segregated." (*New Hampshire citizen.*)

"No. Because for 32 years I have been on the police corps and have seen so much I hope I will never see houses of prostitution open again." (*Virginia chief of police.*)

"No. Besides degrading the morals of the entire community they spread the most terrible and disgusting diseases to the innocent as well as the guilty. There never was a clean and safe house of prostitution and never can be." (*Printer, Utah.*)

These replies, typical of the 944, indicate how the public has been educated to the menace of houses of prostitution and to the failure of the so-called "policy of segregation" to solve the problem.

IV.

The fourth question asked was:

Do you believe that all prostitutes and their patrons should be treated alike (subjected to a thorough medical examination to ascertain if they have a communicable disease and, if found infected, placed under strict surveillance until disease is no longer communicable)? (Yes or no.) Why?

The replies to this question were as follows:

Yes	1,520
No	110
No answer	77

Of the number answering "Yes," 321 were representatives of the building trades. Only 19 representatives of such trades answered "No." Culinary and provision workers voted 45 to 2; metal trades, 144 to 13; transportation trades, 144 to 16; and chiefs of police, 117 to 3.

One chief of police gave as his reason for answering "Yes," "I believe that the diseases which prostitutes and their patrons have are more dangerous to the public than smallpox, and still we quarantine smallpox." Another, "No rules can be too strict in this matter, as

the health of some innocent person may be affected by coming in contact with some other person having a venereal disease."

An Indiana miner answered: "Yes. What is the difference whether a child inherits one of these diseases from its father or its mother?" An Illinois molder: "Yes. Anyone that has any respect for humanity should be willing to wipe out disease, and it can not be wiped out if only one side is being looked after." An Arizona printer: "Yes. Absolutely. To protect the innocent ones who are trapped by both male and female profligates; to protect the unborn child that is ofttimes born of such parents, and the innocent bride who suffers."

The representative of a Massachusetts women's organization, in answering "Yes." gave as her reason, "Morality and health of the public have no sex." Another, "Female prostitutes rarely marry, but male prostitutes do marry, usually a pure girl. She and her children are the sufferers." "The public good requires that every possible means should be employed to cure and prevent the spread of venereal diseases," wrote a New York citizen. A South Carolina printer wrote, "Yes. Sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander." A Rhode Island machinist, "Yes. Because we believe that both sexes are equally susceptible to communicable diseases."

A Mississippi carpenter wrote, "Yes. I believe the examination should apply as rigidly to males as to females, but the male is more likely to communicate the diseases to victims who in their innocence may never know of the fact that they were diseased." A Minnesota engineer, "Yes. By no means should a person be allowed to spread a communicable disease. Male and female both should be treated." The secretary of a Montana trades and labor council answered, "Yes. Disease could then be controlled. A rotten egg broken in a dish with a good one makes two rotten ones."

V.

The last question asked was:

Or do you believe that only female prostitutes should be so treated? (Yes or no.) Why?

The answers to this question were:

No	1,413
Yes	121
No answer	173

Representatives of building trades voted 299 "No" to 31 "Yes." Clerical trades voted 13 to 2. Representatives of culinary and provision trades voted 52 to 4; representatives of the metal trades, 138 to 11; mining trades, 43 to 3. The printing trades voted 63 to 9;

transportation trades, 125 to 10. The needle and textile trades voted 13 to 2, and 104 chiefs of police voted unanimously "No." Representatives of women's organizations voted 75 "No" to 1 "Yes." The largest number of those voting "Yes" was found among the painters and barbers, but here the vote stood, respectively, 55 "No" to 10 "Yes" and 39 "No" to 10 "Yes."

A large number of the 173 who did not answer the last question voted "Yes" on the fourth. Many who filled out the questionnaire evidently considered that a positive answer on the fourth was equivalent to a negative answer on the fifth. This accounts for the increased number of those listed as not answering.

A sergeant of police gave as his reason for answering "No," "I do not believe in establishing one standard for women and another for men along this line." A chief of police wrote, "No. Because both sexes can spread venereal disease." Another, "No. A square deal for all and special privileges for none." "I believe that the suppression of venereal diseases is the paramount duty of the Nation to-day," wrote one citizen. Another, "The idea of scorning a girl that has fallen and winking at a man because he got away with it is to my mind at the bottom of much of the evil. Both are human, and if it is wrong for one sex it is wrong for the other."

One hundred and fifty West Virginia miners answered, "No. We don't believe it would be just to show respect for persons in this matter." A Utah printer answered, "No. Female prostitutes contaminate only the guilty. Male prostitutes contaminate the innocent. It is far more important that the male prostitutes be under surveillance until free from the disease." A South Carolina printer, "I regard the male more dangerous than the female because he is freer to go and come and 'carry.'" A representative of a woman's organization in Massachusetts wrote, "No. If only one were to be examined and treated, it should be the patron, since the prostitute harms only the patron, while the patron may harm numbers of innocent women and children."

"Both," wrote a Massachusetts merchant, "I see no reason for favoritism. It's a poor rule that won't work both ways. I am not strong on the 'woman tempted me.' I believe that man helps 60 per cent to his own fall." "Why discriminate?" asked one correspondent, "The patron is as much a menace as the prostitute." "What has sex to do with the problem?" inquired another. And a California plater answered succinctly, "No. Fifty-fifty."

VI.

The 494 who disagreed with the point of view of the Public Health Service that open houses of prostitution are a menace to public health

and should be abolished advanced almost invariably the old arguments with which those experienced in the problem of commercialized vice have long been familiar—those arguments which experience in dealing with the problem of prostitution has disproved.

"With open houses you can watch and examine them and control the spread of disease." (*President chamber of commerce.*)

"It is next to impossible to abolish prostitution. Almost as well try to abolish hate or make love mandatory by legislation as try to control the oldest emotion known to civilization." (*Manager chamber of commerce, Massachusetts.*)

"No. As long as human nature remains as it is prostitution will continue; therefore regulate it as best you can. If you close the houses you drive it elsewhere." (*Ohio banker.*)

"Not entirely. This appears to be a necessity and I believe that recognized houses are the lesser of two evils." (*Business manager Virginia chamber of commerce.*)

"No. Because it is a necessity like a sewer and keeps a lot of people out of trouble. Otherwise some good girl would be ruined." (*Arkansas banker.*)

"We should not advertise to the public that our women sell themselves for this purpose. Aside from that I believe that the control of venereal diseases can be more nearly accomplished by having open houses of prostitution." (*Idaho banker.*)

"To have open houses means protection for decent women." (*Carpenter, Connecticut.*)

"No. Because they are naturally required." (*Barber, Illinois.*)

"No. Because prostitution has always flourished, and the abolition of houses only scatters prostitutes, who ply their trade everywhere and encourage the spread of disease. Furthermore, they come into contact with girls who are often led astray by scattered prostitutes." (*Mining engineer, Arizona.*)

In brief, the arguments were: "Houses of prostitution are necessary evils." "Prostitution is a necessity." "Without prostitution some good girl would be ruined." "Medical supervision and periodical inspection is the practical solution." "The segregated district decreases crime by enabling police supervision of a recognized crime center." "Safeguards against sexual perversion by providing an outlet for the unrestricted appetites of men." "Protects boys and young men from contact with the prostitutes by removing temptation from the streets and residential districts." "Decreases prostitution by legislation." "Protects the community from demoralizing and detrimental proximity of prostitution." "Decreases graft in connection with prostitution and the exploiting of prostitutes."

A large number of those who expressed themselves in favor of the segregated district based their opinion upon the mistaken belief that periodical medical examination of prostitutes would protect the patrons from venereal diseases. Many stated that segregation and regulation have been tried in Europe and have proved successful.

To these resolution No. 5, arising out of the proceedings of the North European Conference on Venereal Diseases, is an answer:

This conference, having considered the general measures for the combating of venereal diseases which have been adopted by the participating countries, is unanimously of the opinion, so far as the experience of these countries is concerned:

5. That the legal and official toleration of professional prostitution has been found to be medically useless as a check on the spread of venereal diseases and may even prove positively harmful, tending, as they do, to give official sanction to a vicious traffic.

The countries participating in this conference (May 20–25, 1921) were England, Finland, Germany, Holland, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark.

The old myths have crumbled, but progress toward the elimination of venereal diseases can be made only as rapidly as education and knowledge of science become more general. Those who believe in regulation and periodical medical examination of prostitutes in most cases sincerely believe that by this method venereal diseases can be eliminated and many of our social evils prevented. Education has not been diffused. They do not know that these methods have been tested and found unsuccessful; but, to quote an independent periodical—

The last excuse for the red light has gone glimmering. And the red light is slowly but surely being dimmed. Little by little public opinion has been educated, inch by inch commercialized vice is being forced from its vantage ground of political power, and slowly but irresistibly sanity and decency are winning.

Of course * * * it is a long hard fight we are making and * * * complete victory is far in the future. Long after we have routed the most crude and vicious forms of prostitution many remnants of this old curse of mankind will remain. For generations there will be men with uncontrolled appetites and women to keep them company, but when political power and commercialized profits are taken from prostitution we then have to deal only with individuals seeking gratification, and that is, after all, an individual question.

VII.

A large number of those replying supplemented their answers with letters. These are worthy of quotation at length. Limitation of space, however, prevents the inclusion of more than a few excerpts.

A representative citizen of Georgia said in part:

Since the time the Government, on account of Macon's proximity to Camp Wheeler, closed up the segregated district here, there has been, as far as I am able to learn, far less prostitution and disease than before. No one whose opinion is worth considering desires a return to the old conditions. Perhaps real-estate speculators—a few of them—may, but public sentiment, on the whole, is against it. Conditions are still open to criticism, but formerly they were vile.

The Government venereal-disease clinic did great good here, and it is a thousand pities there is not a clinic for venereal diseases in every community.

A representative of the International Brotherhood of Pulp, Sulphite and Paper Mill Workers in Wisconsin, wrote in part:

I have brought this to the attention of all the union men here, and I believe that this must have the attention of every man and woman that has the welfare of the people at heart.

I can say that any man that has a son or daughter can not in honesty to himself or to his neighbor ignore this terrible evil any longer.

I think the trouble with most of our men is that they have considered this a joke.

If you are able to get one man's interest in every central labor union in the United States, you will be doing a great service to the people.

I do not believe that there is any cure for this except by teaching the men the terrible effects of this evil.

I shall be very glad to be of any service to you that I can. If you have anything that will help to check these diseases, I most certainly will bring it to the attention of all the union men in this locality.

If encouragement were needed by public health officers it could be found in plenty in some of these letters. "This is a great move in the right direction," wrote an Ohio banker, "no other disease in the world does so much damage;" and the owner of a department store in an Ohio city said, "More power to the educational activities of your department." A local of the International Molders' Union in Alabama added: "We can boast with pride of having as fine a body of men in our local as any organization has, and we stand ready at all times to give support to any good measure that will tend to uplift and do good to all. Yours for better conditions at all times."

A citizen of Massachusetts wrote, "My observation and experience have led me to believe that the diseases arising from prostitution are among the worst afflictions of the human race and can be controlled.

"I have no patience with the plea that prostitution is necessary as a protection for our women from rape, etc. Living in a town where the Perkins Institute and the Massachusetts School for the Blind are located, I see daily on the streets the innocent victims of the diseases caused by prostitutes. This last phase is to my mind a sufficient reason why no expense should be spared to mitigate the effects of prostitution, and to this end I believe that prostitutes and their patrons, as well as anyone suspected of being tainted, should be placed under the strictest surveillance."

An Arkansas carpenter, "Being a resident of one of the world's greatest health resorts for such diseases, and seeing so much of it here, it certainly gives me great pleasure to see our great Nation begin to wage war on such a menace to our present and future generations, and I am willing at any and all times to render all my assistance in helping to stamp it out."

A Mississippi carpenter answered, "No. I regard this work, the eradication of venereal diseases, as the greatest work that the Federal Government has ever instituted. It will be of great benefit to the whole Nation."

It remained for a superintendent of police in a Nebraska city to sound the call to high endeavor:

We must face this problem resolutely, frankly, and fearlessly, molding public opinion as we go, but never turning back on the program started by the Government during the war.

Issued by

THE UNITED STATES PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE,

16 SEVENTH STREET SW.,

WASHINGTON, D. C.

INDICATE HERE HOW YOU WILL HELP.

[Check the appropriate items, sign your name, and forward this sheet to your State board of health, or to the United States Public Health Service, 16 Seventh Street, Southwest, Washington, D. C.]

I desire the following pamphlets in the quantities indicated for the purposes checked below:

-------- copies Pamphlet A. FOR YOUNG MEN.—This pamphlet gives the facts about venereal diseases and sex hygiene.

-------- copies Pamphlet B. FOR THE GENERAL PUBLIC.—An appeal to public officers and adults generally to cooperate in the fight against the venereal menace. This pamphlet emphasizes the social damage.

-------- copies Pamphlet C. FOR BOYS.—This pamphlet tells older boys and young men how to keep fit. It includes information about sex hygiene and venereal diseases.

-------- copies Pamphlet D. FOR PARENTS.—A pamphlet telling parents how they may instruct their children in matters of sex.

-------- copies Pamphlet E. FOR GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN.—A pamphlet of carefully compiled information essential to the welfare of older girls and young women.

-------- I desire to inform myself on this subject.

-------- I desire to instruct my children.

-------- I will distribute pamphlets among the following:

Officials_____
(Give positions.)

Agencies _____
(Specify what agencies.)

Employees _____
(Give name of firms.)

Audiences_____
(Specify what audiences.)

Organizations _____
(Give names.)

Friends _____
(State how many.)

-------- I prefer to see single copies of the pamphlets before ordering for distribution.

-------- I have spoken to the mayor, board of health, or other officials concerning this matter, and we desire to receive help in the further extension of the campaign in our city.

Name_____

Address_____

Position_____

V. D. No. 68.

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